



# Recovering from Sexual Abuse

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## NORTHSTAR COMPASS

*Navigating  
Toward Better  
Emotional  
Health*



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## THE WOUNDS

Adult sexual contact with children is a universally prohibited behavior, yet sexual abuse and incest have been reported in almost every civilized society. The most common forms of incest are father/daughter, stepfather/stepdaughter, uncle/niece, and brother/sister. Child sexual abuse and incest may also be homosexual.

The frequency of incest and sexual abuse varies with different research groups. Some research indicates as many as 25% of college-age females report sexual abuse and molestation incidents. There are no cultural, economic, geographic, racial, or religious barriers that make one immune from this abuse.

## LINGERING EFFECTS

Adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse may show evidence of their abuse through symptoms in physical, behavioral, emotional, and spiritual development.

### Physical Effects

Physically, victims may have symptoms involving chronic tension, migraine headaches, insomnia, nausea, and stomach ailments.

## **Behavioral/Emotional Effects**

Behavioral/emotional symptoms may include difficulties with initiating or maintaining personal relationships. Some of the most difficult issues survivors face involves establishing intimacy with others. According to research, 89% of incest survivors reported an inability to trust people, while 86% also struggled to develop close relationships (Lundberg-Love, et. al., 1987).

Other behavioral and emotional symptoms include tendencies toward self-harm, such as eating disorders and suicidal behavior, fear of separation from others, or tendencies to withdraw from social interaction. Effects of abuse may influence the personality of survivors

and they may demand perfection from themselves and others. Some survivors become extremely controlling or manipulative of others, while others are unable to act independently and become passive.

Survivors may experience difficulties related to low self-esteem, guilt, anger, or alienation. These effects of abuse not only impact victims as individuals but also have a strong influence on relationships with their spouse, friends, and other family members. The repercussions of abuse may also lead to problems in parenting as the cycle continues and children may become victims of abuse by adult survivors.



## GETTING HELP

The nature and complexity of an abusive experience leaves survivors needing a strong support system and network of trusted individuals in whom they find comfort and encouragement. Unfortunately, there are several common barriers in the process of acquiring a strong support system:

- Denial, such as stating, “It didn’t happen, it didn’t affect me.”
- Blaming oneself for the abusive incident
- Believing nothing will help
- Feeling spiritually inadequate or full of shame
- Feeling too embarrassed or ashamed to look for or accept help

## WHAT SURVIVORS CAN DO

- Identify and own the abuse and the resulting problems. Examine yourself carefully, looking at mood, fears, relationship problems, bad habits, self-image and sexual problems.
- Allow previously trapped emotion to surface. Suppressed emotions affect every area of life.
- Share your painful experiences. Find a trusted, non-judgmental support person and share your hurts and pain. This could be a counselor or trusted friend, preferably someone who does not have a relationship with your abuser.
- Reject tendencies to blame yourself. You have been victimized by a perpetrator and are not responsible for the abuse.
- Gain knowledge and understanding. You can read and talk with others who share similar experiences and pain. Learn from those who now live healthy and balanced lives.
- Forgive those who hurt you. Acknowledge the specific pain, hurt, and injury inflicted on you. Release the perpetrator, letting go of resentment, anger, bitterness, and hatred. Forgive, not because they deserve it, but so you are free from bitterness. There are many complicated blocks and deceptions in this area. Be willing to seek help.
- Identify current vulnerabilities. How has past abuse affected your relationships, decision-making processes, ability to trust, self-esteem, and self-concept? If you can anticipate places you are likely to struggle in your journey of healing, you can be better equipped to address them.
- Begin to reach outside yourself. You are not alone. Many others have walked this road before you and stand ready to help. A support group specifically for those who have experienced sexual abuse could be especially helpful. As you begin to heal, you think about sharing your story with others who are just beginning their own journey. Helping others can bring a sense of purpose to your own journey and healing.

## EMOTIONAL HEALING

Letting go of your pain is essential to heal from sexual abuse. It is important to not to confuse “letting go” with burying or suppressing the emotional turmoil associated with the abuse. It is crucial to deal with the difficult feelings such as shame, guilt, rage, grief, and fear. Trying to bury these feelings never makes them go away. It is only when they are acknowledged, addressed, and adequately processed they can be truly released.

This process is difficult without help. Seek out the counsel of a pastor, trusted friend, or professional counselor. Be patient with yourself. Healing seldom happens overnight—it often takes months, and even years, to fully process the difficult residual effects of sexual abuse.

Don't let bitterness drag the pain of the past into the future. There is hope for restoration and healing.

### SOURCE

Lundberg-Love, P.K., Crawford, C.M. & Geffner, R.A. (1987). *Personality characteristics of adult incest survivors*. In R. Geffner (Chair), *Characteristics and treatment of adult incest survivors*. Symposium presented at the Southwestern Psychological Association annual meeting, New Orleans, LA.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Hal Baumchen, PsyD, LP, LADC** is the President and Clinical Director of NorthStar Regional. He is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist (LP) and a Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselor (LADC) with over 30 years of counseling experience.

He received his Master's Degree from Wheaton Graduate School, his Doctorate of Psychology (PsyD) from the Illinois School of Professional Psychology, and his Certificate in Co-Occurring Disorders from Adler Graduate School. He serves frequently as a seminar leader, and has taught workshops in the USA, Canada, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, South Africa, and India.

He is the author of *Journeys* and *Destinations*, two books on co-occurring disorders treatment, and the co-author of *Finding Hope Again: Overcoming Depression* with Dr. Neil T. Anderson.

*This information in this publication is not intended as a substitute for professional help or to be used as a diagnostic tool. If you have serious difficulties with anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues, please seek professional help.*